

THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS PLACE NAMES IN PRESERVING LIVING HERITAGE OF THE ZULU PEOPLE IN KWAZULU-NATAL

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the role of indigenous place names in KwaZulu-Natal as a way of preserving living heritage. Names are powerful symbols that connect us with our ancestors and our space and should be preserved as part of our oral history and cultural heritage. Toponomastics research done in KwaZulu-Natal has placed more emphasis on the semantic, orthographic significance of naming and the role of name givers, but has not focused on the preservation aspect of living heritage. Through oral traditions which fall under living heritage, I argue in this paper that indigenous place names are key in preserving living heritage and indigenous knowledge. Oral history is preserved in various indigenous place names in KwaZulu-Natal. Ong (1982: 8) is of the opinion that oral cultures concern themselves with doings and happenings, not with being as such: oral cultures narrativise their own existence and their environment.

Keywords: indigenous place names, indigenous knowledge systems, preservation, heritage, culture.

Introduction

There is a great need to preserve our indigenous place names as living heritage and promote African indigenous knowledge systems in South Africa. Heritage is often defined as our legacy from the past, what we live with in the present, and what we pass on to future generations to learn from, to marvel at and enjoy. Nationally, indigenous knowledge systems are guided by a policy and a Bill on the protection of indigenous knowledge systems within the Department of Trade and Industry as well the Department of Science and Technology. Continentally, there is a need for regional integration, which is a grand aspiration of the African Union. The purpose of this paper is to review the role of indigenous place names as a way of preserving living heritage and indigenous knowledge systems in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Living heritage according to the National Heritage Resources Act (1999: 8) means the intangible aspects of inherited culture, and may include: cultural tradition, oral history, performance, ritual, popular memory and the holistic approach to nature, society, and social relationships. According to the Department of Science and Technology (2004), Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) refers to bodies of knowledge, skills, innovations, beliefs, experiences and insights of the people in their respective environments

and communities, produced locally, accumulated over the years and transmitted orally from one generation to the next. I argue that indigenous place names are key in preserving cultural tradition, oral history and indigenous knowledge systems. The author wants to argue that indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) that have been historically marginalised need to be brought to the centre in order to explore their potential contribution to world knowledge. The paper concludes by stating that place names have an important function as social and personal identifiers.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, the paper relies on a comprehensive review of literature relating to place names in general. In particular, the documentary research method was employed (Mogalakwe 2006). This method refers to the analysis of documents containing information about the phenomena of interest to the researcher (Bailey 1994). Although this method is not common in the social sciences (Mogalakwe 2006), it provides useful tools to categorise, investigate, interpret and identify the limitations of physical sources, be they in the private or public domain (Payne and Payne 2004). For the purposes of this paper, various legislative and policy frameworks that guide the naming of places, indigenous knowledge systems and preservation of heritage in South Africa were studied. The documents that were consulted include: the Dictionary of South African Place Names, the South African Geographical Names Act, 1998 (Act No 118, 1998), Handbook on Geographical Names, and Policy on Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

Background to the study

The place names of a people constitute a very important part of the language of that people. They sometimes preserve words and elements no longer current in that language. Place names constitute linguistic heritage which is priceless and that should be preserved. Language is an example of intangible heritage that should be protected through place names. According to Raper (2004), place names constitute an essential part of the cultural heritage of a nation. They reflect aspects of history, of agricultural, domestic, economic, humanitarian, industrial, military, political, scientific, sporting, and other activities; they honour the heroes and leaders of the people, commemorate important events, reflect the beliefs, values, fears, and aspirations of the people, they embody words for and references to flora, fauna, climatology, geology, hydrology, topography and many other aspects of the country in which people live.

Place names according to Helleland (2008) are coined as descriptions of the features or of circumstances that influenced the naming process, they are vital for the knowledge of our past. They also make out a part of one's identity both as linguistic expressions and as identifiers of the landscape. He continues to argue that place names are parts of the history of a given area and if they are correctly interpreted, reveal details of the name-givers' understanding of the named place at the time when the name was

coined. Thus, names may be viewed as a historical oral or written text of the landscape and the people who used the landscape.

If we extend the research of the function of place names, we will note that place names are not only addresses in the landscape but also mental maps of one's surroundings, the recognition of environmental details. We can say that the names reveal the named feature and the landscape, both the present and the past. Place names are pegs which carry incidents and stories. In his study on Apache moral narratives, Basso (1994: 35) concludes that "[n]owhere do place names serve more important communicative functions than in the context of historical tales".

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that is adopted in this paper is hermeneutics. Mkhize and Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014: 12) are of the opinion that the call to engage with IKS and the past does not amount to reification nor does it mean a nostalgic, uncritical engagement with tradition. Hermeneutics (Gadamer 1975) is useful in elucidating this point. Hermeneutics is a classical discipline concerned with the interpretation and understanding of texts. This includes written as well as non-written (oral) texts (Nabudere 2011). From a hermeneutic perspective, understanding is an inter-subjective process; it involves coming to terms with others' 'forms' of life or their horizons of understanding (Gadamer 1975). It is these prior, historical forms that make inter-subjective understanding possible (Foucault 1970). According to Gadamer (1975), interpretation should engage with the great thinking traditions that are embodied in historical texts. This requires the interpreter to enter into a hermeneutic circle. This means that in order to understand the whole, one needs to understand its constituent parts. Similarly, the constituent parts need to be understood with reference to the whole. Thus to interpret indigenous place names and IKS with reference to foreign theoretical frameworks is to lose sight of this hermeneutic circle (Nabudere 2011).

Review of literature related to IKS and indigenous place names

In South Africa there are various legislative documents that support the preservation of heritage such as the National Heritage Resource Act (1999). This Act aims to promote good management of national estate, and to enable and encourage communities to nurture and conserve their legacy so that it may be bequeathed to future generations. Our heritage helps us to define our cultural identity and therefore lies at the heart of our spiritual well-being and has power to build our nation. It promotes new and previously neglected research into our rich oral traditions and customs. The other important legislative document is the South African Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy (2006). This policy is the culmination of collaborative work between government departments such as Science and Technology, Trade and Industry, Health, Environmental Affairs and Tourism as well as the Department of Arts and Culture. The IKS policy is an enabling framework to stimulate and strengthen the contribution

of indigenous knowledge to social and economic development in South Africa. The policy has four key drivers, namely:

1. The affirmation of African cultural values in the face of globalisation.
2. Practical measures for the development of services provided by IK holders and practitioners such as agriculture, traditional medicine, indigenous languages and folklore.
3. Contribution of indigenous knowledge to the economy.
4. Interfaces with other knowledge systems

Wa Thiong'o (2005) notes that, when IKS are studied and coded in European languages, local communities, the original experts, and custodians of these knowledge traditions are disempowered. In the end, local communities have to learn about their own knowledge systems from foreign scholars. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that the original meaning of IKS is often distorted, if not altogether lost. I have chosen to deal with indigenous place names of the Zulu people in KwaZulu-Natal as a way of preserving isiZulu language and oral histories as intangible heritage.

Place names and landscape identity

In earlier times, people were to a great extent bound to the regions where they were born, and they lived and died within more or less the same surroundings, whereas people of today are used to moving and travelling and thus experience different landscapes – and to some extent different identities. Still the author thinks that most people feel especially attached to the landscape of their childhood – and to other landscapes where they have stayed for a longer period of their lives. It is a fundamental human trait to feel attached to landscape, both as individuals and as a group.

The author would like to make an example with her personal circumstance to show how attached she is to the landscape of her childhood. She was born at *Eluphepheni*, a small rural community in *KwaGqwathaza*, isiZulu name for Highflats (Raper 2004: 194). She believes in dreams and she has noticed that, whenever she dreams, she is carried back to the landscape of her childhood. Even the setting includes the old rondavels and six-corner house they used to have, not the current structure.

A cluster of qualities and meanings

A place name does not only point out a place, but mediates a cluster of qualities and meanings, partly valid for a single individual, partly shared by a given social group (Hellaland 2008). Probably people in general feel most attached to the place names of their childhood, and then to the names where they have lived for a longer time. If a person has positive experiences in a place, then he or she will have positive feelings in relation to the place and its name, and conversely negative feelings if he or she has negative experiences in a place.

The value of place names as part of one's identity is enhanced by their quality as links to the past. As already mentioned, most place names are coined as descriptions of

features or places in general at the time when they were given, thus telling the name user about the place at an earlier stage (given that he has some understanding of the name in question). Most people are only to some extent aware of the historical information of a place name, but perhaps they have a more or less unconscious feeling of their historical impact; they are “something which always has been there”. This may give a feeling of confidence to the surrounding name stock. It is natural for a human being to have roots in the past, and as place names mostly are objects of the past, attached to single places, they are valuable as such. If people study the history and the meaning of the names of an area, that may contribute further to their wellbeing. To explain this point, the author will make examples of place names derived from clan names:

KwaNgcolosi. The place of the Ngcolosi clan.

KwaMagwaza. Raper (2004: 194) states that the settlement is 5 km south-west of Melmoth and 24 km east of Nkandla. This was a site of a mission established in 1860 by Robert Robertson.

Maphumulo. This is a settlement that is 42 km north-west of KwaDukuza. The place is of isiZulu origin meaning ‘place of rest’. It was borne by a mission established in 1850 by Bishop HPS Schroeder of the Norwegian Missionary Society. It is the place of the Maphumulo clan.

Another aspect which should be considered as to the place names of a landscape is that they function as a social consensus or a sort of an agreement reached over many generations. In most cases, the place names of an area are used orally and in a dialectal form, which also reflects a social consensus. When local people see place names written on road signs and on maps they often react negatively because they feel that the standardised written forms of the names break with their idea of the correct name.

Indigenous place names

The author chose *Imbali*, *Emkhambathini* and *Empangeni* as place names to indicate the importance of geographic features and to link these place names with ethnobotany. Ethno-botany (formed by two sections: **ethnology**, which is the study of culture and **botany**, which is the study of plants) can be defined as the scientific study of the relationship between people and plants. Two central fields, upon which ethnobotanical investigations are based, are the study of **nomenclature**, which concerns techniques of naming plants and choosing between competing names and **classification**, which concerns the discovery of principles by which biological entities are classified taxonomically (Louwrens 2004). Zulu names for plants belong to a folk-taxonomy classification system which is part of a largely oral indigenous knowledge system.

Imbali Township is one of the biggest townships under Umsunduzi Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It is 15 km from Pietermaritzburg. *Imbali* was initially occupied by the Indian community. Later, in 1965, they were evicted and the area was then occupied by the black community, who were forced to move from areas which were designated as ‘white only’ through Government’s implementation of the Group Areas Act. Some of these people were coming from rural areas to look for employment

in the city. *Imbali* Township has 8 sections which are called Units. There is unit 1, 2, 3, CC, 13, 18, BB and J. Unit 18 is divided into three sub-sections. The naming this Township *Imbali*, a Zulu name for 'flower', and the streets thereof, was done by the first black residents, who were commissioned by the Department of Bantu Administration that was in control of it at that time. Mr C.A.G Dhladla (Colenso), among others, was responsible for naming streets in particular. This place was named with reference to a geographic particularity, the existence of a flower. Interestingly, in a study conducted by Ngcobo and Ndimande-Hlongwa (forthcoming), African Indigenous plants were chosen as a source in streets naming in *Imbali*. In the examples we have given it is clear that street names are preserving important indigenous knowledge about plants in the area.

Emkhambathini. According to Koopman (2002: 140) *eMkhambathini* is the locative form of the noun *umkhambathi*. *Umkhambathi* is an isiZulu word referring to the tree called *Paperbark Acacia* in English and *Acasia sieberiana* in Latin, which is indeed the dominant acacia in the *eMkhambathini* area. Different writers such as Doke & Vilakazi (1958: 377), Pooley (1993: 140), and Coates-Palgrave (1977: 253) concur that this place name is based on the tree name *uMkhambathi* in isiZulu. Lugg (1970) believed that there were so many trees in the area. Raper (1987, 2004) and followed Doke and Vilakazi's theory that the mountain was so named because it has a flat top similar to the flat top of the *umkhambathi* tree.

Empangeni. According to Koopman (2002: 150) there seems to be little doubt that *eMpangeni* takes its name from Reverend Grout's 1850s mission station, itself named for the *eMpangeni* stream which is tributary of the uMhlathuze. There are debates amongst linguists and historians. There are two main theories, namely the botanical and the plunder. The botanical theories debate the merits of the *Encephalartos (cycad)* species *umphanga* and the hard-pear tree (*olinia ventosa-cymosa*).

Conclusion

Indigenous place names are key in the preservation of our indigenous languages, which constitute intangible heritage. Place names are important as well in preserving oral history and oral traditions. They make out a part of one's identity both as linguistic expressions and as identifiers of the landscape. As academics, we should also preserve indigenous place names in written format in the languages of the people that they will easily associate with. Different countries need to collaborate with local authorities, which could be municipalities, districts and traditional leaders. We need to engage our communities in the research that we conduct so that we perform our other role, that of civic involvement in our academic space. We are privileged in academic space in that our research can inform policy making at the highest level. If academics meet in conferences and deliberate on research findings and not link up with important structures in various countries who are supposed to use this information, then we are not contributing to knowledge production, which is what universities should do.

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